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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LA PAZ 001234

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [BL](#)

SUBJECT: BENI/PANDO AUTONOMY VOTES: OPPOSITION VICTORIES

REF: A. LA PAZ 1214

[1](#)B. LA PAZ 1044

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Both the opposition and government are in spin overdrive following the June 1 autonomy referenda in the departments (states) of Pando and Beni. With exit polls and early official results predicting pro-autonomy votes in excess of 80 percent, the government relied on arguments that all those who abstained would have voted against the referendum, while it engaged in obstruction tactics to ensure high abstention rates. Despite these efforts, dubious government math, and repeated government claims that the vote was illegal and irrelevant, the opposition clearly gets a boost from the results. We expect another victory for the opposition in Tarija's June 22 autonomy referendum, before which regional opposition leaders announced they will not enter into a dialogue with the government. Prospects for such a dialogue may improve in July, with pressure increasing to reach a "grand compromise" prior to an August 10 recall referendum on President Evo Morales and department prefects (state governors). End Summary.

The Numbers: Autonomy Wins Despite Abstentions

[1](#)2. (U) Official results of the autonomy votes will not be released until June 6, however exit polls and quick counts show a landslide in both Beni and Pando departments (states) voting for autonomy, albeit with relatively high abstention rates. According to four exit polls, the autonomy referendum won with between 80 and 81 percent in Beni (opposed 19 to 20 percent) and from 82 to 85 percent in Pando (opposed 15 to 18.2 percent). The most relied-upon figures from Ispos Apoyo exit polls show a 34.5 percent abstention rate in Beni and a 46.5 percent rate in Pando. Leading daily La Razon reported the first official results from electoral courts in Beni and Pando June 3: with 49.2 percent of the vote counted in Beni, 81 percent voted for the referendum and 18.9 percent voted against it (31 percent abstention rate); in Pando with 85.7 percent of votes counted, 82 percent voted for the referendum and 18 percent against it (42 percent abstention rate). The states of Beni and Pando represent four and one percent of Bolivia's population, but cover a third of the country's land

mass and, with Santa Cruz, now a third of Bolivia's departments have voted overwhelmingly in favor of autonomy referenda in defiance of the central government.

The Interpretation: The Magic of Morales Math

13. (U) The government declared it had actually won in Pando and come close in Beni. In Pando, the government claimed 56.2 percent of eligible voters in Pando are against autonomy by adding abstentions with no votes. Using the same logic, the government claimed 47.2 percent of voters in Beni are against autonomy. The government used the same math to contend most people voted against the Santa Cruz referendum May 4 (54 percent), later backpedaling to claim half (48.94 percent) of Cruzenos were opposed to the autonomy vote. According to government media outlet ABI, all the people who didn't vote would have voted against autonomy but either "did not want to vote, did not have time to vote, or abstained out of faith to a (government) cause."

Government Rehashes Santa Cruz Criticisms/Tactics

14. (C) Despite the government's Herculean efforts to create a statistical victory from the votes' tallies, it never-the-less continued to simultaneously discount the referendums as illegal, irrelevant, and fraud ridden on June 2:
--President Evo Morales rejected the merits of both referenda and condemned "anyone who wants to divide the country. He

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also reiterated that he was not afraid of the August 10 recall referendum on his mandate, a common theme in his recent public comments. Morales characterized the abstention rates as a successful "rebellion" against Beni and Pando autonomy movements on May 3.
--Government Minister (Interior Secretary) Alfredo Rada questioned the opposition's celebration of the vote, considering the high level of abstention, and criticized the opposition for allegedly bringing in groups of pro-autonomy youth (Santa Cruz Youth Union) to "plant terror."
--Presidency Minister (Chief of Staff) Juan Ramon Quintana also questioned the results considering the "crushing abstention" and assured the government would not "negotiate in an illegal manner" or recognize the "illegal" results. "There is no possibility -- none -- of recognizing these votes," said Quintana.
--Charges of fraud have been steady from the government since May 30, focusing June 2 on charges accusing Pando Prefect (governor) Leopoldo Fernandez of illegally inflating voter roles.

15. (C) The government also employed similar tactics during the Santa Cruz referendum to ensure high abstentions: high-profile government trips with giveaways and project announcements, road blockades, intimidation at/near polling stations, and burning of ballot material (Reftel a). Many tense standoffs and some open altercations between pro- and anti-referendum forces resulted in 12-20 reported injuries, but only a handful were serious enough to be hospitalized and there were no deaths. In Pando, anti-autonomy leaders in the municipality of Filadelfia blocked voting and prevented entrance of autonomy leaders, including Prefect (Governor) Leopoldo Fernandez. (Note: Morales and Quintana were similarly blocked from regional trips by the opposition in the past week. End Note.) There were anti-autonomy protests in 13 rural population of Pando and voting had to be suspended in six electoral polling stations. In Beni, six stations were not opened the provinces of Moxos and Ballivian.

Opposition Leaders Echo May 4 Placitudes

16. (U) Both Beni and Pando pro-autonomy movements celebrated

the votes with great fanfare in their respective capitals June 1, couched in many of the same grandiose platitudes used by Santa Cruz opposition leaders during that departments May 4 autonomy referendum victory. Pando Prefect Leopoldo Fernandez said the vote would "decide the destiny of our regions." Santa Cruz Prefect Ruben Costas said the victory in Pando "surprised him" and that "the government will have to acknowledge these results and join in this message of peace and democracy." In Beni, Prefect Ernesto Suarez said "the autonomy process was irreversible and the government, above all, must listen to the voice of the people," after casting his vote. "Democracy won't be stopped, we want to live in a democratic country, we want to maintain that democracy, we also want to pass the message that we cannot close our eyes and ears to what's going on," an apparent reference to the Morales' rule.

International Voices: From Calm to Kooky

¶7. (U) According to media reports, OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza reflected June 2 that although he "respects" the Morales government for representing the interests of the Bolivian majority, the interests of "regional entities" are also valid and both interests need to "harmonized." "The issues under debate ... have a close relationship with the conservation and strengthening of democracy and the preservation of national unity," said Insulza. Vegard Bye, representative of the UN's High Commission on Human Rights, visited the region May 31 and advised Pando Prefect Fernandez not to force opening polling stations in the area of Filadelfia due to the prospects for armed violence and potential deaths. Venezuelan President

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Hugo Chavez opined June 2 that the referendums are "separatist and illegal," and in any event were "failures."

Autonomy Deja Vu Express Next Stop Tarija and Beyond

¶8. (C) The next autonomy referendum will be held in Tarija June 22. Chuquisaca Department leaders want to organize an autonomy vote in the near future, but decided to postpone a plan to conduct an autonomy vote June 29, which is the same day Chuquisaca will vote for prefect (Note: MAS Prefect David Sanchez fled the country last year following political violence in the department capital of Sucre. End Note.). Cochabamba Department Prefect Manfred Reyes announced June 2 that he will steer his department toward an autonomy vote as well and said he asked Morales to acknowledge past and future autonomy referendums. La Paz Prefect Jose Luis Paredes told PolOff that the idea of autonomy transcends the current political standoff between Morales and opposition and is popular even in the government-friendly departments of La Paz, Oruro, and Potosi. "This is hard concept for Evo to fight, everyone wants greater control within their own departments."

Dialogue: Less of the Same

¶9. (U) Following the Beni/Pando votes, prefects from the opposition-controlled Media Luna (Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, and Tarija) announced they would not attend the dialogue called by the government, Catholic Church, the OAS, or the "Group of Friends" on June 9. They asserted negotiations would only be possible after the June 22 autonomy referendum in Tarija.

Comment

¶10. (C) The autonomy victories in Beni and Pando once more place Evo's government on the defensive. The government's campaign to scare people out of participating while

simultaneously discounting low turnout is base hypocrisy. Its claims the votes are illegal and irrelevant are belied by its frantic efforts to manipulate the results. Despite these efforts, the opposition has clearly racked up another two victories. It is difficult to assess the future impact of the votes as the central government and electoral court refuse to recognize them, but, as Al Jazeera put it, at a minimum "the autonomy movement has stolen momentum from Morales' central project: a draft constitution." We predict a similar opposition momentum booster for the June 22 vote in Tarija. After the autonomy vote in Tarija, there may be new push for dialogue, but this will be a small window as both sides head into the recall referendum August 10 (itself a possible point of negotiation). With the autonomy votes, the regional opposition has been able to effectively block Evo's efforts to impose his will, i.e., push forward to perpetrate himself in power with a new constitution. If the government remains unwilling to compromise, the current stalemate with the Media Luna opposition will continue, with violent confrontations a real possibility in the coming months. End Comment.
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